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THE MIND OF THE AFRICAN NEGRO AS REFLECTED IN HIS PROVERBS

As a study of folk literature of different races offers one way of understanding their mental attitude toward life and its problems, the folk literature of the Negro will reveal to us his inherent moral and intellectual bias and the natural trend of his philosophy. Let us therefore examine some phases of this subject, paying particular attention to that part which relates especially to the proverbs. The sources of such literature are abundant. A little research in a well-equipped library brings one into a curious and informing mass of knowledge, ever increasing in bulk, in the French, German and English languages, as well as in many strange and highly inflected African tongues.

A cursory reading of this literature discloses at once that our general knowledge of Africa has been based in the past mainly on those external facts that strike the sense of sight, such as the physical appearance of the population, native dress, and handiwork, musical instruments, implements of warfare, and customs peculiar to the social and religious life of the people. Only through the folk literature, however, can we get a glimpse of the working of the mind of the African Negro. Professor Henry Drummond, although he had traveled in Africa and had written at length about it, still exhibited a longing for this insight when he observed: "I have often wished that I could get inside of an African for an afternoon and just see how he looked at things." At that time much of the folk literature of that continent was not as now available. A deeper and more extensive reading of it at present strengthens our belief in the ancient saying "Out of Africa there is always something new," a rather disquieting thought, if we have reached the conclusion that native culture on that continent has never risen above the zero point.

A critical examination of the content of this folk literature will result in a division somewhat similar to that found in the same type of literature of other races. Such a division discloses stories, poetry, riddles and proverbs. The African folk literature is especially rich in proverbs. So numerous are these proverbs that it has been said that there is scarcely an object presented to the eye, scarcely an idea excited in the mind, but it is accompanied by some sententious aphorism, founded on close observation of man and animals and in many cases of a decidedly moral tendency. Lord Bacon remarked many years ago that "the genius, wit and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs." Cervantes in *Don Quixote* says "Methinks, Sancho, that there is no proverb that is not true, because they are all judgments drawn from the same experience which is the mother of all knowledge." If these sayings be true, then the proverbs of the African Negro should be examined in order to see if they approach these observations.

For convenience of the reader an effort has been made to arrange these sententious sayings under general subjects. These selected by no means exhaust the mine of African proverbial lore but are only a few nuggets that suggest the Negro's power to infer and generalize and to express himself in a graphic and concise way relative to life as he observed and experienced it.¹

Anger

Anger does nobody good, but patience is the father of kindness.

Assistance

Not to aid one in distress is to kill him in your heart.

Birth

Birth does not differ from birth; as the free man was born so was the slave.

¹ Among the works which have been consulted in the preparation of this article are the following:

R. F. Burton, *Wit and Wisdom from West Africa*.

S. W. Koelle, *African Native Literature*.

A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*.

Heli Chatelin, *Folk Tales of Angola*.

In the beginning our Lord created all. With him there is neither slave nor free man, but every one is free.

Boasting

Boasting is not courage.

He who boasts much cannot do much.

Much gesticulation does not prove courage.

Borrowing

Borrowing is easy but the day of payment is hard.

Chance

He who waits for chance may wait for a year.

Character

Wherever a man goes to dwell his character goes with him.

Every man's character is good in his own eyes.

Charity

Charity is the father of sacrifice.

Children

There is no wealth without children.

It is the duty of children to wait on elders, not elders on children.

Condemnation

You condemn on hearsay evidence alone, your sins increase.

Contempt

Men despise what they do not understand.

Covetousness

If thou seeketh to obtain by force what our Lord did not give thee, thou wilt not get it.

Danger of Beauty

He who marries a beauty, marries trouble.

Danger of Poverty

Beg help and you will meet with refusals; ask for alms and you will meet with misers.

Danger of Wealth

It is better to be poor and live long than rich and die young.

Disposition

A man's disposition is like a mark in a stone, no one can efface it.

Doing Good

If one does good, God will interpret it to him for good.

Duty to One's Self

Do not repair another man's fence until you have seen to your own.

Effort

You cannot kill game by looking at it.

Evil Doer

The evil doer is ever anxious.

Experience

We begin by being foolish and we become wise by experience.

Familiarity

Familiarity induces contempt, but distance secures respect.

Faults

Faults are like a hill, you stand on your own and you talk about those of other people.

Faults of the Rich

If thou art poor, do not make a rich man thy friend.

If thou goest to a foreign country, do not alight at a rich man's house.

Favor of the Great

To love the king is not bad, but a king who loves you is better.

Folly

After a foolish action comes remorse.

Forethought

A person prepared beforehand is better than after reflection.

The day on which one starts is not the time to commence one's preparation.

Forgiveness

He who forgives ends the quarrel.

Friends

There are three friends in this world—courage, sense, and insight.

Friendship

Hold a true friend with both of your hands.

Future

Thou knowest the past but not the future.

As to what is future, even a bird with a long neck can not see it, but God only.

Gossip

Gossip is unbecoming an elder.

Gentleness

A matter dealt with gently is sure to prosper, but a matter dealt with violently causes vexation.

Hate

There is no medicine for hate.

Heart

It is the heart that carries one to heaven.

Heathen

He is a heathen who bears malice.

Hope

Hope is the pillar of the world.

Ignorance

Lack of knowledge is darker than night.

An ignorant man is always a slave.

Whoever works without knowledge works uselessly.

Immortality

Since thou hast no benefactor in this world, thy having one in the next world will be all the more pleasant.

Injury

He who injures another brings injury upon himself.

Laziness

Laziness lends assistance to fatigue.

A lazy man looks for light employment.

Love

One does not love another if one does not accept anything from him.

If you love the children of others, you will love your own even better.

Meekness

If one knows thee not or a blind man scolds thee, do not become angry.

Mother

Him whose mother is no more, distress carries off.

Necessity of Effort

The sieve never sifts meal by itself.

Old Age

There are no charms or medicine against old age.

Opportunity

The dawn does not come twice to wake a man.

Patience

At the bottom of patience there is heaven.

Patience is the best of qualities; he who possesses it possesses all things.

People

Ordinary people are as common as grass, but good people are dearer than the eye.

Politeness

Bowing to a dwarf will not prevent your standing erect again.

"I have forgotten thy name" is better than "I know thee not."

Poverty

A poor man has no friends.

He who has no house has no word in society.

Riches

Property is the prop of life.

A wealthy man always has followers.

Sleep

Sleep has no favorites.

Strife

Strife begets a gentle child.

Sun

The sun is the king of torches.

Trade

Trade is not something imaginary or descriptive, but something real and profitable.

Truth

Lies, however numerous, will be caught by truth when it rises up.

The voice of truth is easily known.

Unselfishness

If you love yourself others will hate you, if you humble yourself others will love you.

Valor

Boasting at home is not valor; parade is not battle; when war comes the valiant will be known.

The fugitive never stops to pick the thorn from his foot.

Wisdom

A man may be born to wealth, but wisdom comes only with length of days.

A man with wisdom is better off than a stupid man with any amount of charms and superstition.

Know thyself better than he who speaks of thee.

Not to know is bad, not to wish to know is worse.

A counsellor who understands proverbs soon sets matters right.

PROVERBS BASED ON THE OBSERVATION OF ANIMALS

Butterfly

The butterfly that brushes against thorns will tear its wings.

Dog

If the dog is not at home, he barks not.

A heedless dog will not do for the chase.

A lurking dog does not lie in the hyena's lair.

Elephant

He who can not move an ant, and yet tries to move an elephant, shall find out his folly.

The elephant does not find his trunk heavy.

Were no elephant in the jungle, the buffalo would be a great animal.

Fly

If the fly flies, the frog goes not supperless to bed.

Fox

When the fox dies, fowls do not mourn.

Goat

When the goat goes abroad, the sheep must run.

Rat

When the rat laughs at the cat, there is a hole.

The rat has not power to call the cat to account.

The rat does not go to sleep in the cat's bed.

Wolf

He who goes with the wolf will learn to howl.

A. O. STAFFORD